



If there is any real hope for a transnational sense of the brotherhood of man, it may come from an environmental disaster that makes us feel we're all on the same side, fighting a common foe.

James Fallows

*The Atlantic*, July 1990

## Forum

### CDC's New Chief

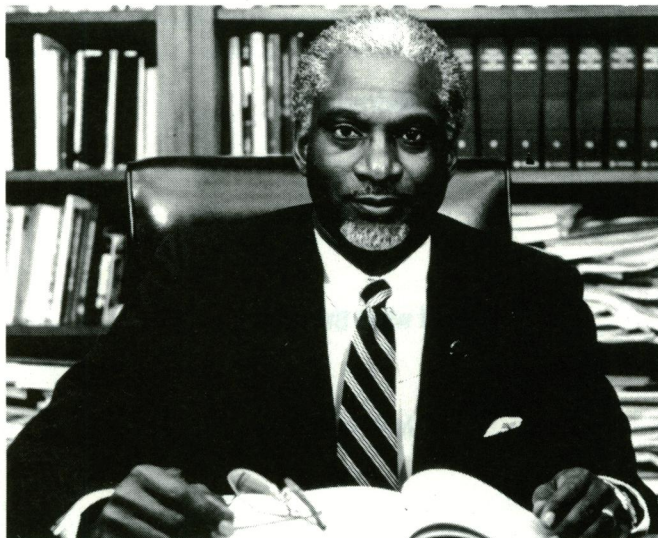
"Ideally suited for the challenges facing CDC in the 1990s," is how Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Massachusetts) has described David Satcher, the new head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. The former president of Meharry Medical College in Nashville took over as director of the nation's primary public health agency in September.

Satcher plans to expand the mission of CDC beyond combatting infectious diseases to include what he considers the major public health threats facing urban American society. In a September interview in the *New York Times*, Satcher said, "I don't think you have to take anything away from CDC's role in order to say that if you look at the major cause of death today it's not smallpox or polio or even infectious diseases. Violence is the leading cause of lost life in this country today. If it's not a public health problem, why are all those people dying from it?"

Although the agency's main concerns in the past have included health risks such as cancer, infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, occupational health and safety problems, and childhood diseases, an identification of violence as a significant public health problem is not entirely new to the CDC. What is new is Satcher's anticipated focus on the problem. One of his goals for the agency is to develop pilot programs to improve inner cities by curbing violence, encouraging optimism in teenagers, and enlisting the help of black churches in disseminating health information to their communities.

Some believe Satcher was chosen for the job, at least in part, because of his strong emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention, which correlates well with the Clinton administration's proposed health plan. Said Satcher, "We have a major problem with immunization in this country; probably less than 50% of the adults are current with tetanus and diptheria boosters. We've got to work on AIDS control. We need to get churches involved in stop-smoking programs and alcohol control programs. I think there's great potential there." Satcher plans to make health promotion and disease prevention the cornerstone of his direction of CDC. Said Satcher, "I think this is an optimal time for more emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention, because I think with health care reform, the appreciation of the role of prevention will be much more important than it has been in the past, and it will be seen more as a part of the health care system. Satcher was a consultant to Hillary Rodham Clinton's task force on health care reform.

Satcher was born in Anniston, Alabama. He received a bachelor of science degree from Morehouse College in Atlanta. He received an MD and PhD in cytogenetics from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland in 1970. From 1979 to 1982 he served as chairman of the department of community medicine and family practice at Morehouse College School of Medicine. He became president of Meharry Medical College in 1982, where he established an Institute on Health Care for the Poor and Underserved in 1989.



David Satcher—Violence may be our greatest public health threat.

In addition to the 7000-employee CDC, Satcher will oversee the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, a component of the Public Health Service within the Department of Health and Human Services.

### Look Ma—No Cancer

A little fluoride in U.S. drinking water is no cause for alarm, a new report says, but research is needed to assess the daily intake of extra fluoride in foods, toothpaste, mouthwash, and other products.

The report, issued by the National Research Council, says lightly fluoridated water does not increase the risk of cancer, kidney failure, bone disease, stomach ailments, infertility, birth defects, or genetic mutations. Thus, the report counters fears raised by a widely publicized 1990 study that equivocally linked intake of heavy fluoride levels with cancer in male rats. Questions remain, however, concerning low-level exposure.

Drinking slightly fluoridated water may cause dental fluorosis, staining and pitting of tooth enamel, in roughly 10% of the population, the NRC report concludes. Children 2-5 years old are particularly susceptible to fluorosis. Yet, the report, prepared by experts representing pathology, dentistry, toxicology, and other specialties, shies away from stating whether mild fluorosis is a health problem or merely a cosmetic annoyance.

As an interim standard, the EPA's current cap of 4 parts per million (ppm) for fluoride in drinking water is appropriate, according to the report, which was sponsored by the EPA. Crippling skeletal fluorosis is known to occur when fluoride levels exceed 8 ppm for many years, and risk of kidney failure may increase at levels in excess of 50 ppm.

Since dental fluorosis has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, the report also calls for increased scrutiny of